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Fliegenschnee, Katrin

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There are simply always enough good reasons against having a child!

Fears and worries about motherhood among childless, highly
educated Austrian women

Katrin Fliegenschnee

1. Introduction

All across the developed world, fertility rates have declined dramatically in the past decades. One explanation of this phenomenon is that people are postponing their wish to have a child. In particular the postponement of the first birth is a typical feature in current fertility patterns. This holds true for Austria as well. One assumption is that births which are originally »merely delayed« will never become reality (Frejka et al. 2004). Engelhardt and Prskawetz (2004) show that women's extended education has an important influence on the delay of family formation in Europe. Educational attainment generally delays entry into parenthood (e.g., Buber 2001, Liefbroer/Corijn 1999).

We decided to study this issue by using a qualitative approach. The focus of this paper is on the region of Vienna. The aim was to get an idea what people think about having a child and the future. As our research aimed at analysing the reasons for delaying childbearing to a higher age, we decided to initially focus on higher educated childless women, because they postpone their fertility wishes to a larger extent than do lower educated women (Liefbroer/Corijn 1999).

The next section deals with the theoretical literature, the topic of uncertainty. Section three describes the methodological approach used in this research as well as the methods and concepts used for analysing the data. Section four presents the results. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings.

2. Background

2.1 Theoretical considerations

The Second Demographic Transition tries to explain the causes of the European fertility postponement and decline. It is assumed that ›individual autonomy‹ and ›female emancipation‹ are the main reasons for delaying family formation. Women's extended participation in education and in the labour market and changes in the value of children have strongly influenced family and fertility behaviour (Lesthaeghe 2003).

Moreover, the status of women has altered and this also has consequences for the fertility rate. In his ›gender equality theory‹ Peter McDonald (2000) considers that gender roles are the most important factor when looking at fertility. Countries with a conservative attitude towards the role of women are precisely those with low fertility levels. McDonald (2000) describes the combination of liberal economy and traditional, male-dominated family organisation as being fatal for the level of fertility.

Richard Easterlin's theory (1980) assumes that concepts such as the standard of living and living arrangements are formed during a person's childhood. Socialisation experiences shape young people and are the basis for most of their ideas about the future. This is connected with their earning prospects. In times of recessions, this typically implies that it will take longer before they start to build a family.

Another theory to be discussed here is the New Home Economics approach (Willis 1973, Becker 1992, Becker/Lewis 1974). It assumes that people aim to maximise their lifetime income. Decisions are therefore made by calculating costs and benefits to increase utility. This also applies to fertility behaviour. (Becker 1992). Time is an interesting variable in fertility behaviour. When income is rising, time – and particularly the time spent on childcare – becomes more valuable. This has contributed to raising the costs of children (Becker 1992). The standard needs of a child are getting higher and higher, and to have children has thus become a really expensive issue these days.

When female education and employment rates increased, fertility patterns changed. The idea of opportunity costs can – at least to some extent – explain why the decision for a child is not that easy. Not only wages as such are taken into account but also the fact of losing income when taking maternity leave or working part-time. Gary Becker and H. Gregg Lewis (1974) argue that the higher education of women exerts a strong positive effect on the quality and a strong negative effect on the number of children. The right timing for a child plays an important role – especially for women with a high level of education. When thinking about fertility,

costs and benefits of having a child have to be considered and this includes the optimum timing of childbearing.

In Icek Ajzen's and Martin Fishbein's theory of planned behaviour they argue that intentions are the driving force behind people's activities and the main element in their planned behaviour (Ajzen/Fishbein 1991).

Wishes and ideas may also be influenced by close network members. Micheli and Bernardi (2004) call this social learning. It is one concept of social influence that is defined as social interaction with the members of a person's social network. In this interaction, people exchange information, which modifies or rebuilds subjective beliefs, social values and norms.

2.2 The issue of uncertainty

Some authors have identified economic uncertainty as a reason for the fertility decline (e.g., Kreyenfeld 2005, Bhaumik/Nugent 2005, Kohler/Kohler 2002). Using an economic approach, we can say that economic uncertainty is a function of costs. Women with higher education will more often put more emphasis on their own financial independence and security and are therefore bound to delay fertility until their own situation is reasonably secure.

Fears are also described in the literature, especially the concept of economic stress. If parents have trouble earning enough to support a family, fears of the future are reinforced (Easterlin 1980). Ranjan (1999) argues that in many countries a decline in fertility was observed when the economic situation became increasingly uncertain.

In the literature, uncertainty is mainly mentioned in connection with economic problems or mortality. If child mortality is high, people tend to have more children (Bhaumik/Nugent 2005). Giuseppe Micheli and Laura Bernardi (2003) consider uncertainty from another perspective. Becoming a parent is connected with change, and it is also an irreversible event; both consequences can delay or inhibit the decision as such. In this context, uncertainty is not directly connected with present and future economic conditions, but rather with fears about the future with a child.

3. Methodological approach

3.1 Data collection

This study uses a qualitative approach, because it provides a different view of the phenomenon with respect to the micro level.

From a methodological point of view, guideline interviews – in particular problem-centred ones (Witzel 2000) – seemed to be the most useful technique. Qualitative research is a circular process: analysing and collecting data are not separated but very closely connected courses of action (Flick 2002). In this study, the topic of uncertainty and fears came up during the analysis and was not an issue for research from the outset. After analysing the data, the guideline was changed in line with the new hypotheses and new interviews were collected and analysed.

As the women were selected on the basis of theoretical sampling, our group was not a random sample of persons but based on conscious decisions (Lamnek 1995). We used the snowball sampling method. We decided to start with a homogenous group, i.e., women around age 30, who were highly educated, had a partner but no children yet, who lived in Vienna and were not personally known to me. The aim was to understand why they had opted for a childless life up till now – and who or what influenced their choice. Nine interviews were analysed in detail. The women were between 27 and 34 years old and had been in a partnership for at least three years. It is planned to also interview their partners provided they agree.

3.2 The analysis

In this study *sequence analysis* was linked with the coding principles of *grounded theory*. Ulrike Froschauer and Manfred Lueger (1992) suggest starting with sequence analysis if different methods are used, because it not only offers textual advantages but also supports the researchers' sensibility for rough interpretation methods.

Based on sequence analysis, hypotheses were developed. These hypotheses were checked at other points and continuously reviewed (Froschauer/Lueger 1992). We used the coding principle of grounded theory to encode the data, build some more hypotheses and link already existing ones. This was not a linear process, as we used the steps for analysing alternately.

The concept of objective hermeneutics and sequence analysis will not only yield the obvious meaning of the statements but also reveal the latent structure of sense of an activity (Froschauer/Lueger 1992). Using grounded theory, we carefully compared each statement with the others and with existing categories in order to

find similarities and differences (Strauss/Corbin 1996). The techniques used here were »open coding«, »axial coding« and »selective coding« (Flick 2002).

4. The concept of fears

The issue of uncertainty and fears came up regularly during the interviews but was not easy for the women to talk about. This category is described in more detail in this section.

»And. Well, maybe it is also a bit of – well, fear is maybe too exaggerated – but well, yes we want children, but perhaps better tomorrow. (laughs)« (Melanie)

Talking about feelings is not easy and finding the right words why someone behaves in the way s/he does is often hard. Postponing an uncertain situation is one strategy to avoid the issue, at least for some time. Priya Ranjan (1999) found that the increase in uncertainty about the future income could lead to the postponement of fertility decisions. In Germany, financial uncertainty had a significant and negative effect on childbirth in 1992, while employment-related uncertainty had a significant and negative effect on childbearing in 1996 (Bhaumik/Nugent 2005).

Job security is an important issue when talking about fertility. As explained in the Second Demographic Transition theory, the values have changed. Women want to be financially independent. They all speak about their own work situation.

»(...) There is my panic, I think I will never be settled in my job with what I am doing (...)« (Jenny)

Well-educated women want to be somewhat settled in their job before having a child. Aart Liefbroer and Martine Corijn (1999) argue that the risk of having a child will threaten the future income situation less when a relatively high position has already been reached. Especially if the women want to work in a particular field or to specialise on something, they are more under pressure to consider their actions twice. Therefore they remain in the working process for a longer time so as to have better opportunities afterwards. They aim at reaching some rather undefined point in their career after which they will be »safe«. They do not know when they will reach this point, which creates a feeling of uncertainty.

»I am aware that it's an illusion to think, O.K., I wait till it is reasonably safe in my job, I mean then you'd wait forever (laughs). (...)« (Irene)

The fear of forgoing the possibility of finding an interesting, well-paid and safe job after having a child is so high that it came up in nearly every interview. What they

were afraid of was that they would lose the opportunity to make a good and interesting career. The fear increases when women want to do something special and have aspirations beyond an ordinary office job. However, the women do not only worry about their job situation. If they observe that people in their close network experience something difficult they think about it. One example is to end up as a single mother.

»I know women where it is like that and who simply had the child and were abandoned. This is so difficult and at that point I knew, I would like this even less.« (Silvia)

Their worries are quite understandable. Ron Lesthaeghe (2003) remarks that in the last decades the number of one-parent families, most of them headed by women, has raised the ›feminisation of poverty‹. The divorce rate has risen since the 1960s. Lesthaeghe (2003) argues that one explanation is that people have higher expectations regarding their private relations as compared to 50 years ago. The quality of the relationship is important. If people have the feeling their partner is not exactly the right person to be with for a very long time, they are unlikely to set up a family with him/her. The fear of becoming a single mother is strongly connected with concerns about the financial future.

»(...) and you don't know if you can risk having a child or if you'll be unemployed and on welfare at age 40. (Ponders for 3 seconds.) This is difficult to judge, can I risk it?« (Melanie)

Some interviewed women feared that they would not be able to survive. And yet, these women live in Austria, which is a rich country. Though they are all well educated, they women still fear to become poor after having a child. Having the feeling of potential financial insecurity makes women delay their fertility plans. We should also bear in mind that arguments about financial uncertainty are socially accepted in Austria. Invoking them is much easier than saying that you do not feel like having a child. However, women are not only concerned about their situation, they also consider the conditions prevailing in society.

»If women are doing fine, then they are having children but in the past years this once more went in the other direction. (...) Ehhmm, well, well, I think that things will not become better so quickly in the next couple of years.« (Dani)

Nobody knows what the future has in store, but if the situation is already bad nowadays, people will delay their fertility plans. As Michaela Kreyenfeld mentions in her paper, not only the current economic situation has an impact on fertility but also the way, in which people judge their future (Kreyenfeld 2005: 6). However, future requirements are difficult to assess. The ideas of how life with a child will be are strongly connected with worries, because the women have expectations of their own lives as well as wishes and dreams of a life with a child. One strategy to avoid

such fears, at least for some time, is to defer the decision, i.e., to postpone having a child. Women also fear that their *dreams and wishes will not come true* or that they will not get the chance to provide a good future for their children.

»You see, this is my fix and I don't know if (my future plans) are realistic, and I don't know which part of it I should drop to get, let's say, half of the thing I want to have.« (Jenny)

Although the ideas about ideal conditions and situations may differ, all women want to get to their ideals as closely as possible. To know that some things will not be ideal makes women worry. Women want to offer their child the best opportunities. What also seems to be important is the health situation of mother and child. If the mother suffers from health problems, the question of the best possible support for the child is very important.

»For me it would be very important to be sure that my child will be healthy.« (Sabine)

All women were afraid that their children might not be healthy. Their own health and body and how things might change after they had a child were raised from time to time. Yet, they knew that being too afraid to have a child would mean to live a life without children. Kathleen Gerson (1985) noted in her research that women fear the negative consequences of remaining childless.

»The topic of being unable to have a child is, of course, an issue. One that people are afraid of – well I am also afraid of it.« (Irene)

The rational reaction of being afraid to be physically unable to have a child would be to try to have one as soon as possible. The younger a woman is, the more likely she is to get pregnant. However, women postpone childbearing to a higher age even though they are aware of these facts. Many women also realised that their future would be somewhat different to what they expected. So far, their strategy had been to wait till the conditions were better or different. However, the longer they waited the more difficult things seemed to get. Because the conditions are very important, women consider them intensively.

»Yes, conditions, and I think that the conditions are a catastrophe. (laughs)« (Dani)

Women want to afford special things and act *responsibly*. When they realise that the conditions are really bad they think it wiser to postpone childbearing. They are expected to think twice about having a child, because »intelligent women should know how much they can afford«. Dirk Van de Kaa (1996) mentions that fertility and family formation are strongly influenced by social rules and intentions.

»I think some people consider this in so much detail that it kills the wish (to have a child). In the end, nothing happens because of all the responsibility.« (Irene)

It is very important for women to act responsibly and to behave in a way other people in their network and/or surrounding consider responsible. However, not only the women's own ideas and dreams are important. A big topic was also the anxiety to fall short of somebody else's expectations.

I: »How would your friends react, if you were to have a child?«

J: »They would die of laughing because they know me.« (Jenny)

The expectations of members of the social network can influence the decision for or against a child. In her article, Laura Bernardi (2004) discussed that reproductive behaviour and reproductive ideas are connected with the attitudes of close network partners. If a woman's friends do not think she would make a good mother she is bound to feel insecure. This does not mean that she will never have a baby but she will carefully think before taking that decision. Fears are very much interlinked with social pressure. With regard to childbearing, women should be both good mothers and productive workers. Today women have different possibilities to live. They can be housewives and mothers or career women or something in between. Because there is no clear role model, it can be difficult to decide, which role fits them best. Living modes are also conflicting and the outside world judges which pattern a woman is adopting. What others say can increase the feeling of fear, even if these people are not close to the woman.

»I think you need a thick skin, that others may think you are an uncaring mother if you do not stay at home the whole time (...). I guess I am not ready for this, I have to cotton on to this idea so that I will have a thick skin at the time (I have a baby).« (Irene)

Catherine Hakim (2003) assumes that women are highly responsive to social pressure. What a society considers valuable and therefore expects is an important factor in fertility behaviour. Christoph Bühler and Dimiter Philipov (2005) argue that individuals belong to, and are embedded in, a social environment. This influences their preferences and shapes their opinions. Expectations on women are that they work in their jobs or have children, but both should be done in a perfect way.

During the interviews, fears and uncertainties were spontaneously touched upon many times when answering certain questions. The interview included a question on people's fears with regard to children. I got very few concrete answers to this question. This reinforces the hypothesis that fears are something subconscious. In any case, fears influence the decision for a child as well as the timing, and more research should be done on this subject.

5. Discussion

This study discusses the effect of fears and uncertainty on fertility. The theory of the Second Demographic Transition explains many of these results. Today, women have the possibility to work and to have children. This produces a certain pressure because combining family and work becomes difficult. As McDonald argues, gender equality would help to reduce this stress and women's fears. From this perspective, childcare facilities would only solve half of the problem; values have to change as well.

Richard Easterlin's theory is useful to explain other parts of the results. The women interviewed in this study thought about their future lifestyle and were afraid that they would not manage to get what they really wanted.

The New Home Economics approach explains a lot by employing the idea of opportunity cost. Women worry mainly about not being able to return to their jobs or having fewer opportunities in their future career if they have a child. Being financially independent and having a secure occupation are considered very important. One problem seems to be that many women do not know how long they should wait before their job situation is reasonably safe. They find it difficult to calculate the costs and benefits of having a child, which, in turn, causes insecurity and fears.

Ajzen's and Fishbein's theory of planned behaviour can be used to explain why women are afraid of the future. According to them, women have certain ideas about their lives with a family – but they also worry that these ideas and wishes will not come true.

Observing the influence of network members may also help to understand what women are afraid of. In particular the experiences of close friends are likely to make women think about things that might happen to them. This can also create fears, e.g., to end up as a single mother.

It seemed difficult for the women to judge which behaviour was appropriate and sufficiently responsible. Fears of reactions by others were mentioned several times during the interviews. The influence of network partners or other people should not be underestimated and is not only supportive for having a child.

To conclude, only the combination of several theories can help us understand what well-educated women in Vienna are afraid of. Our results show that existing values are very important in explaining fears and uncertainty. Economic uncertainty apparently it is not the only issue. At any rate, fears and uncertainties are strongly connected with fertility. More research is needed to get better explanations why women behave the way they do when it comes to fertility.

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